

Affluenza: Rampant consumerism erodes us

By Paul Majendie Thu Jan 25, 10:37 AM ET

Beware the Affluenza Virus. An epidemic of mindless consumerism is sweeping the world with the compulsive pursuit of money and possessions making people richer but sadder.

That is the stark warning issued by best-selling British psychologist Oliver James after a "mind tour" of seven countries chronicling how depression envelopes the affluent.

"We have become addicted to having rather than being and confusing our needs with our wants," he told Reuters in an interview to mark publication on Thursday of "Affluenza."

Globe-trotting from New York to Sydney, Singapore and Shanghai via Copenhagen, Moscow and Auckland, he concluded after interviewing 240 people that "selfish capitalism" has run riot.

Bigger houses, more cars, larger televisions, younger faces -- these goals are frenetically pursued by middle-class workaholics afflicted by "Affluenza."

"Studies in lots of different nations show that if you place high value on those things, you are more likely to suffer depression, anxiety, addictions and personality disorders," he said.

James concluded, "People in English-speaking nations are twice as likely to be mentally ill as people living in mainland western European nations."

Always wanting bigger and better is an emotional cul de sac, argues the 53-year-old psychologist, broadcaster and author.

What makes "Affluenza" so readable and differentiates his eloquent polemic from the legion of self-help books that offer trite short-cuts to happiness are the potted biographies of the subjects he interviews.

Take New York.

Compare and contrast Sam, the miserable millionaire and sex-addicted atheist who treats women as commodities for fleeting satisfaction, with Chet the Nigerian taxi driver who is contented, optimistic, sexually faithful and religious.

James freely admits that interviewing the affluent in Sydney was a depressing job, calling it "the Dolly Parton of cities in Australia, the most vacuous."

Singapore, where he found shopping to be the national obsession, suffered from "sad, unplayful deadness." Denmark was commendable, worthy but not exactly "a barrel of laughs."

But not all was doom and gloom for the peripatetic psychologist.

He admired the Chinese for their "best is good enough" stoicism and said "I most liked the Muscovites as they still have an interest in the life of the mind."

James the optimistic believes the backlash has begun.

"We are at a turning point. My argument dovetails with the ecological argument -- we cannot carry on consuming in this manner and feel confident our great grandchildren have any future. This inevitably leads us to question consumerism."

"People are sick to the back teeth of this stuff. They don't want any more selfish capitalism."